

Pioneer Press, March 11, 2004

A new \$5.8 million high-tech system being constructed this year will coordinate 145 major traffic signals throughout Lake County and inform drivers of any delays, according to a county summary of the project.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, explained the system at a "mayoral summit" held in Deerfield Monday morning, and including top suburban elected officials from Arlington Heights and Northbrook to Highland Park, Lincolnshire, Riverwoods and Green Oaks. Most of the mayors had just told Kirk that traffic and train whistles were the No. 1 issues in their towns.

"It will make our traffic management more efficient -- good news for many of us who have been stuck at a traffic light without a car in sight from any direction -- relief is coming," Kirk said.

The project is being funded by \$3 million already approved by Congress, Kirk said. The balance of \$2.8 million is being paid for by Lake County, said Martin G. Buehler, Lake County director of transportation.

If a referendum on next Tuesday's ballot is successful, some of the project will be funded with proceeds from an increase in the Lake County sales tax.

The project will include \$1.1 million for fiber optic and communication equipment that will be controlled by a traffic management center in Libertyville, according to a county summary of the project. Two operators will monitor traffic from 5:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday with more intense monitoring during morning and evening rush hour periods, the report said. It is set to go on line in June 2005.

A phase two project will expand the project to the entire county at a cost of \$13.5 million and would be funded partially by federal funding and partially by the sales tax, the report said.

Also helping relieve traffic will be expanded service in 2005 from the double tracking of Metra's North Central line that serves Wheeling, Buffalo Grove, Mt. Prospect, Prospect Heights, Vernon

Hills and Libertyville, Kirk said.

At the same time, Congress is considering providing \$500,000 in funding for another proposed system on Lake Cook Road, between U.S. 41 and Interstate 94, Kirk said. The so-called "Intelligent Transportation System," will also alert drivers to problems and provide alternate routes on that stretch of Lake Cook Road, Kirk told the mayors.

And finally, Metra's new \$1.2 billion Star Line, which will connect O'Hare Airport with towns in the west suburbs and as far south as Joliet is expected to spell relief for such areas as Arlington Heights, Rolling Meadows, Mount Prospect and Hoffman Estates. Eventually, that line may connect up with towns in Lake County and end in Waukegan, Kirk said.

Beyond such concrete proposals, a possible shake up in all the area agencies that control transportation -- the CTA, Metra, RTA, NIPC, and CATS -- is under consideration by a task force chaired by U.S. Rep. William Lipinski, D-3rd, of Chicago, studying the best way to improve traffic flow in the area, Kirk said.

State Sen. Susan Garrett, D-29th, of Lake Forest, a member of the task force, said by telephone Monday a report by the task force, expected this spring, will have some major reform measures for improving transportation that will be sent to state legislators in Springfield for consideration.

"Some consolidation may be looked at," she said. In particular, a proposal to combine the Northern Illinois Planning Commission with the Chicago Area Transportation Study may be part of the recommendation, she said.

A previous consideration of the task force would have created a "uber agency" above the other agencies, but Garrett said that proposal has been tabled.

Northbrook Village President Mark Damisch, who was at the Monday morning meeting, agreed the task force is unlikely to call for creating the "uber agency."

"Whatever steps that are going to happen will be relatively minor, such as combining NIPC and CATS," Damisch said by telephone Monday.

But Damisch, who said he has been on conference calls regarding the task force, also warned that the recommendations may end up calling for realigning allocations for mass transportation to favor Chicago over the suburbs.

"These are very difficult issues, not just about policy, they are also about money. The question is will the suburbs get more money?" he said.

Garrett said such a realignment was unlikely.

"The suburbs will not lose out because we fully understand that in the collar counties, as well as Cook, Lake and Will, the demographics have shifted," she said.

The number of commuters traveling from Cook County to Lake County increased 62 percent from 1990 to 2000, according to a September 2003 briefing paper by Chicago Metropolis 2020, while the flow of workers from one suburb to another went up 56 percent during this time period.

Chicago Metropolis 2020 grew out of a group of business and civic leaders from The Commercial Club of Chicago looking for a regional approach to solving regional problems. It has played a key role in setting up the Lipinski task force, Kirk said.

At the same time, workers going from the suburbs into the city only went up 9 percent during that decade, the paper said.

Regarding train whistles, Kirk urged the mayors to write letters explaining the high costs of putting in new measures to satisfy new Federal Railroad Administration rules required for "quiet

zones." The deadline for comment is April 19. Absent these costly new measures, which will be borne by individual communities, train whistles will once again be sounded. Kirk also put out a proposal to the mayors to have the Illinois Department of Transportation take over administration of the program. One half of all quiet zones in the United States are in Illinois, Kirk said.